SONS OF THE SAME TREE

A Story of Brothers

From

Fawsill

About the Author

Fossill / Fawsill

Fossill — or Fawsill, to the page — is simply a person whose imagination has never learned to stay where it's put. What begins as a stray thought at his desk rarely stays there; it spills, sentence by sentence, until it becomes something closer to a story than a thought ever intends to be. By trade, he studies the slow, patient architecture of trees; by instinct, he studies people, and the quieter architecture of what they carry and cannot say. Between the two, he has found that paper is the only place large enough to hold both — which is, perhaps, the simplest explanation for why he keeps returning to it.

For every brother the mountains kept,
and every sister who kept the lamp burning regardless.

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Chapter One

The Walnut Tree

Their grandfather had planted the walnut tree the year the valley last saw a war worth remembering, or so the old men said, though no two of them agreed on which war it was. By the time Adnan was born, the tree was already taller than the house, its roots older than any quarrel the valley could recall, its shade wide enough to hold three growing boys and every secret they were too young to keep.

Adnan was the eldest, and he wore that fact the way some boys wear their father's old coat — too large at first, then, without anyone noticing the exact day, exactly his size. Their father had died two winters before this story begins, of a cough the mountain air was supposed to cure and did not, and from that winter on it was Adnan who walked the orchard rows at dawn, Adnan who haggled at the market, Adnan whose name the tax collector learned first.

But it was Seerat who kept the house from becoming only a place where four sad people slept. She was two years older than Adnan and had, since their mother's hands began to shake too much for fine work, taken over the mending, the cooking, the small stubborn rituals that make a house feel lived in rather than merely occupied. She sang while she worked — not well, she would be the first to admit, laughing — old songs their mother had sung to her, half-remembered, filled in with nonsense where the words escaped. The boys pretended to find it unbearable. None of them could sleep properly in a house where she wasn't singing.

Ahmed was two years younger than Adnan, and impatient with almost everything, the valley included. He read whatever books the traveling teacher left behind, worked out the mathematics of dams and engines on scraps of paper, and spoke often — too often, Adnan thought — of the city, the college there, the life a clever boy might make for himself if the valley would only let him go. He loved his brothers with the same ferocity he brought to his arguments, which was to say completely, and without much patience for saying so out loud.

Hamad was the youngest by four years, and different from both of them in the way youngest children often are — softer, watchful, in possession of a private world neither brother had the patience to enter. He kept a cloth-bound notebook that he did not let anyone read, not even Seerat, though she had seen enough pages over his shoulder to know it was full of small poems about ordinary things: the particular blue of the sky before snow, the sound the walnut tree made in wind, the way their mother's hands used to move before they began to shake.

And then there was Zehnain, who lived three houses down and had been promised to Adnan since they were children too young to understand what a promise was, by two families who had been neighbors longer than either could remember. It might have been only an arrangement, the kind that so often curdled into duty rather than affection. It was not. Somewhere between childhood and now, without either of them announcing it even to themselves, the arrangement had become the thing Adnan thought of first on hard mornings and last on quiet nights. She brought quince preserves to the house on Fridays and pretended the visit was for Seerat. Seerat pretended to believe her.

On the evening this story properly begins — an ordinary evening, which is the only kind worth having, though no one values them enough at the time — all five of them sat under the walnut tree while the last light

went copper over the peaks. Seerat had made a chai, someone had brought too much sugar, and Hamad was reading aloud, badly and on purpose, from a serious book to make Ahmed laugh, and Ahmed was laughing despite himself, and their mother sat wrapped in a shawl on the doorstep with her shaking hands folded still for once in her lap, watching her children the way a woman watches something she suspects she will not be given forever.

None of them knew yet that laughter, too, could be counted. That a family is issued only so many evenings like this one before the world, which keeps its own accounts, comes to collect what it considers its share.

Chapter Two

When the Valley Held Its Breath

The war did not arrive in the valley so much as it arrived in the valley's conversations, months before any soldier's boot touched its roads. It came first as rumor carried by traders, then as headlines on the radio the tea-house owner kept turned up too loud, then as a poster nailed to the mosque door and the school door and the door of the empty building that had once been a clinic — a poster showing a soldier with an implausibly noble jaw, asking, in bold letters, for sons.

For a valley as poor as theirs, the war's arithmetic was simple and merciless. A recruit's wages, sent home each month, could feed a family through a winter that the orchard alone could not. A recruit's family, moreover, was granted certain considerations — a lighter tax, a faster hearing at the district office — considerations that mattered enormously to households with fathers already in the ground. Ahmed did the mathematics the way he did every mathematics, quickly and without sentiment, and arrived at his answer before Adnan had finished refusing to consider the question at all.

“It is not your decision alone to make,” Adnan said, the night Ahmed announced it, in the flat voice he used when he was too frightened to raise it.

“It was never going to be anyone's decision but mine,” Ahmed said. “I am not a child you're minding. I am a man choosing to feed his family.”

Their mother did not speak. She had not spoken much since the poster went up on the mosque door, as though some part of her had already begun rehearsing a silence she would need later and wanted to make sure still worked. It was Seerat who spoke instead, quietly, not to Ahmed but to the room. “Then go and feed us,” she said. “And come back to eat with us. Both halves of the sentence, Ahmed. Not only the first.”

He promised her both halves. He meant it, the way young men mean promises they have not yet learned the cost of.

The morning he left, the whole household walked him to the crossroads where the recruiting truck idled with four other boys from the village already aboard, all of them trying to look like men and mostly succeeding in looking like what they were, which was frightened children pretending for their mothers' sake. Zehnain came too, though Ahmed was not hers to send off; she had grown up beside him the way one grows up beside a brother one didn't choose, and she cried without embarrassment, which somehow made it easier for everyone else to cry as well.

Seerat did not cry at the crossroads. She waited until the truck had turned the bend and taken its dust with it, and then she went inside and lit the small brass oil lamp that usually sat unused on the kitchen shelf, and set it in the window facing the road.

“What is that for?” Hamad asked her.

“For whoever is out in the dark,” she said, “so that from wherever they are, they remember there is a window that hasn't given up on them.”

She lit it again the next night, and the night after that, and did not stop, though none of them — not even Seerat, who was not given to admitting fear — could have said with any confidence, on that first ordinary evening of the lamp, how many more times it would need lighting, or for whom.

Chapter Three

Hamad's Turn

Ahmed's letters came monthly at first, then less often, written in the cheerful shorthand young soldiers use to keep their mothers from lying awake — the food is decent, the officers are fair, do not worry, tell Hamad the mountains here are nothing next to ours. He never wrote what the valley's men, home on leave, said instead in the tea-house with their voices lowered: about the cold at the front line, about boys they'd trained beside who did not write letters anymore because there was no longer anyone to write them.

Hamad read every one of Ahmed's letters more times than anyone else in the house, and where his brother had intended reassurance, Hamad heard adventure. He was seventeen that year, an age that believes itself invincible on principle, and the notebook of small quiet poems began, without his quite noticing the shift, to fill instead with poems about valor, about the mountains their grandfather's generation had once defended, about brothers who did not let brothers fight alone.

Adnan noticed the shift and hated it. “You write like a boy who has been to war,” he told Hamad one evening. “You have not even been to the district town without Ahmed holding your sleeve.”

“Ahmed didn't have anyone to hold his sleeve,” Hamad said. “And he went anyway.”

The war's appetite, that year, grew faster than the fields could feed it. The age of eligibility, quietly and then not so quietly, was lowered. The considerations promised to soldiers' families were, just as quietly,

extended to volunteers ahead of conscripts, which meant a boy who waited to be called went with less honor and less benefit than a boy who walked to the recruiting office himself. Hamad did the same arithmetic Ahmed had done a year before, arrived at a similar answer, and added to it something Ahmed's arithmetic had not needed: a fierce, uncomplicated wish to stand beside his brother rather than be left behind in a house of women and worry.

He did not ask Adnan. He told him, the way Ahmed had told him, in a voice that shook only slightly.

That was the night the three of them sat under the walnut tree for what none of them yet understood would be the last time all three sat there together. The branches had gone bare weeks before; the tree that had shaded their whole childhood now stood over them like a drawing of itself, all lines and no leaves, and Adnan found he could not be angry at Hamad in its shadow, only afraid in a way anger would have been easier than.

“Whatever happens,” Adnan said finally, because someone needed to say something, and it fell to him, as it always fell to him, “we come back to this tree. All of us. Even if it takes years. This is where we start counting from.”

“All of us,” Hamad agreed, and because he was young enough still to believe a promise could be a kind of protection, he said it easily, almost happily, and reached up to touch a bare branch as though sealing the words to it.

Seerat, coming out to call them in for dinner, stood a moment in the doorway and watched her three brothers under that stripped tree, and did not call out right away. She lit the lamp early that night, though it was not yet properly dark, as if the valley's dusk had begun arriving faster than

the calendar allowed, and some part of her wanted more light in reserve for whatever was coming.

Two weeks later, Hamad boarded the recruiting truck at the same crossroads his brother had left from a year before. Zehnain came again, and cried again, though this time her tears had less of grief's surprise in them and more of grief's exhausted familiarity, the particular fatigue of a body that has already learned how to do this and resents having to do it twice.

Their mother, at the crossroads, finally spoke — the first full sentence anyone had heard from her in months. “Bring him back,” she said to no one in particular, to the truck, to the road, to whatever god was listening. “I have given the valley one son this year. It does not need a second.”

The valley did not answer her. Valleys rarely do.

Chapter Four

The Telegram

The telegram came on a Tuesday, brought by a boy on a bicycle too young to understand what he was delivering, which was perhaps the only mercy available in the whole transaction — that the messenger, at least, was innocent of the message.

Seerat was the one who opened it, because Adnan was in the orchard and their mother's hands, which had been shaking for years over small things, went suddenly and completely still over this large one, still in the particular way that frightened Seerat more than any tremor ever had.

Regret to inform. Killed in action. Border sector. Personal effects to follow.

There is no dignified way to describe what a house sounds like in the hour after such a telegram arrives, and Seerat, who would later be asked more than once by neighbors how she had gotten through it, never had an answer that satisfied even herself. She remembered holding her mother, whose stillness had broken all at once into a shaking that would not stop for days. She remembered that Adnan, when he came in from the orchard and read the paper Seerat could not make herself hand him with words attached, did not make a sound at all — simply sat down on the kitchen floor, exactly where he had been standing, as though his legs had received the news before the rest of him and had quietly decided they were no longer required to hold him up.

She remembered, too, and would remember longest, that it was she who had to keep the lamp lit that night, because for the first time since

she had begun the ritual, no one else in the house could bear to look at it, let alone tend it. She lit it anyway. Not because she believed, any longer, that it could call one particular boy home. But because Ahmed was still out there somewhere, and their mother was watching her from the doorway with an expression that needed the lamp lit far more than the lamp itself did.

Hamad's effects arrived nine days later in a small canvas parcel: a spare shirt, a photograph of the family taken two summers before, and the cloth-bound notebook, its last page unfinished, the poem on it broken off mid-line the way a sentence breaks off when someone walking beside you stops walking. Seerat did not read it aloud. She read it once alone, in the orchard, sitting against the trunk of the walnut tree, and then she closed the notebook and did not open it again for a long time, not because she did not want to remember the words but because she was afraid of how completely she already had.

Ahmed was granted seven days' leave to come home for the mourning, and the brother who returned was recognizable only in the outline — the same tall frame, the same quick stride — while everything that had made Ahmed *Ahmed* seemed to have been left behind at the border along with something of Hamad's as well. He did not cry in front of anyone. He sat under the tree for hours at a time, not speaking, and once Adnan found him there at two in the morning, simply sitting, as though keeping a watch that had no further purpose.

“It should have been me who told him to come,” Ahmed said, without turning around. “My letters. My cheerful letters, about how fair the officers were. I made it sound like a place a boy could go to become someone.”

“You didn't put a rifle in his hands,” Adnan said.

“No,” Ahmed agreed. “I just made him want one.”

Adnan sat beside him under the bare tree, and neither of them said anything further that night, because there are griefs for which even brothers, even under a tree that has held every version of them since they were small enough to fit beneath it together, cannot find the correct words, and can only sit, shoulder to shoulder, in the cold, and let the silence do what talking cannot.

Chapter Five

Conscripted

For a while after Ahmed returned to the front, the valley seemed to grant the household a kind of exemption from its own bad news, as though even a war's arithmetic recognized that a family could only be asked for so much in a single year. Adnan worked the orchard, sent what he could to no one in particular since there was no one left to send it to but the house itself, and watched his mother's hands shake over the smallest tasks — over a cup, a spoon, the clasp of Hamad's old notebook, which she took to holding some evenings the way another woman might hold a sleeping child.

The exemption, when it ended, ended on paper, in language so bureaucratically bloodless that Adnan read the notice three times before he understood what it was telling him. The considerations previously granted to households that had already given a son — the lighter conscription burden, the deferred call-up for the family's remaining men — had been quietly withdrawn as the war's losses mounted and its need for bodies outpaced its willingness to spare any family, however much it had already paid. Adnan, sole remaining son at home, eldest, provider, the one who had promised a father two winters dead that he would keep what was left of the family together, was ordered to report within the month.

He did not tell his mother himself. He could not. It was Seerat, again, who carried the news across the room, the way she had carried every hard thing that year, because someone in that house had to be the one who did not break first, and by now it had become simply understood, without

anyone deciding it aloud, that the someone was her.

Zehnain came the evening before he left, and for once did not pretend the visit was for Seerat's benefit. She brought a shawl she had spent three weeks knitting in secret, wool the deep brown of the walnut tree's winter bark, and put it in his hands without ceremony, the way one hands over something too important to trust to speeches.

“Wear it at the front,” she said. “So that some part of you is still warm from home.”

“I don't know how long —” Adnan started, and she stopped him before he could finish the sentence, because she had already heard versions of it twice from this house and did not need a third telling.

“I know how to wait,” she said instead. “I have had practice.”

Seerat did not knit him anything. She had never been good with her hands the way Zehnain was; her gift had always been the singing, the small daily rituals, the lamp. On his last night, she filled a second lamp — a plain clay one, cheaper than the brass — and told him to keep it, unlit, in his pack.

“When you can, wherever you are, light it,” she said. “Even for a minute. So that whatever lamp I'm keeping here has one to answer to, out there.”

He did not know, packing it carefully between the shawl and his few clothes, that he was carrying two things meant to do the same impossible work — to keep a line open between a house and a war that had already proven, twice, how easily it could sever such lines for good.

At the crossroads the next morning, his mother did not say *bring him back*, as she had for Hamad. She had learned, by then, that the valley did not answer such requests, and had stopped making them. She simply held

Adnan's face in her shaking hands for a long moment, the way she had when he was a boy too small to reach the walnut tree's lowest branch, and said nothing at all, because there was, by that point, genuinely nothing left to say that the last two years had not already said more thoroughly than words could.

The truck took the bend, and took its dust with it, and Seerat lit the lamp that evening for the third time in her life for a brother who might not answer it, though by now she understood, with the particular clarity that comes only from repetition, that lighting it had never really been about whether it would be answered. It was about being the kind of house, and the kind of sister, that kept a window lit regardless.

Chapter Six

The Front

The front, when Adnan finally reached it after weeks of training too rushed to teach him much beyond obedience, was nothing like Ahmed's letters and everything like the tea-house rumors Adnan had spent two years trying not to overhear. It was cold in a way the valley's winters, for all their reputation, had never quite managed — a cold that seemed to come from the ground itself rather than the sky, as though the earth in that place had simply given up on warmth as a project not worth continuing.

He found Ahmed by accident, or by whatever word applies to the kind of coincidence a desperate man is willing to call fate. Their units had been shifted to reinforce the same exhausted sector within the same week, and Adnan, moving up a support trench in the gray hour before dawn, heard a voice arguing with a supply sergeant about rations in a cadence he would have known anywhere, in any war, in the dark.

What passed between them in the days that followed was not the reunion either might have imagined in gentler circumstances — no long conversation, no accounting of the two years apart, because the front left almost no room for either. It was smaller than that, and for that reason larger: it was Ahmed finding Adnan a dry corner to sleep in on the coldest nights. It was Adnan noticing, without saying anything, that Ahmed had stopped eating half his rations and quietly leaving his own untouched portion where his brother would find it. It was, once, in a lull between shellfire that neither of them trusted to last, Ahmed asking, almost shyly, whether Adnan still had Seerat's clay lamp, and Adnan

producing it from his pack, and the two of them lighting it for exactly one minute in the shelter of a collapsed wall, watching the small flame do nothing more useful than exist, and finding that enough.

“Baji would like knowing we did this,” Ahmed said.

“She'll know,” Adnan said. “She always knows things before we tell her.”

The attack came four days later, in the gray hour again, as though the front had learned that dawn was when the brothers were most likely to be found together and had timed itself accordingly. Adnan would never afterward be able to give a clean account of the sequence — memory, in the worst moments, does not organize itself the way a story does — but certain pieces stayed with him whole and unbreakable for the rest of his life: the sound before the sound, if such a thing can be said to exist; Ahmed's hand closing hard on his shoulder and shoving rather than pulling him down into the trench's lowest fold; and then Ahmed himself, a half-second too slow to follow his own instruction, taking in the shoulder and the side what had been meant, by whatever geometry governs such things, for both of them or neither.

There was no long farewell. The front does not grant those either. There was Adnan's hands, useless, pressed uselessly against a wound too large for hands to matter to; there was Ahmed's face, gray-white and strangely calm, the calm not of acceptance but of a body too far gone to manage anything else; and there were four words, spoken so quietly Adnan would spend years afterward unsure whether he had heard them correctly or simply needed to have heard them.

“Tell her the lamp worked.”

He did not say which lamp, or which her. It did not need saying. Adnan held his brother until the calm went past the point where it was

still, technically, a man being calm, and became instead simply the valley's second son given up to the war's accounting within two years of its first, and somewhere behind his own eyes, in a part of himself he would spend the rest of his life trying and failing to fully reach again, something that had been Adnan quietly agreed to a bargain he had never been offered: that he would carry this, all of it, the whole unbearable weight of being the only one left, because someone had to, and it had, as always, fallen to him.

Chapter Seven

The Road Back Alone

The war ended, eventually, the way most wars end — not with anyone's particular victory but with an exhaustion large enough on both sides to finally outweigh whatever had started it, an outcome that arrived on the radio as an announcement and in the trenches as a silence so complete that men wept from the strangeness of it before they wept from anything else. Adnan's discharge came with a wound in his side that had healed wrong and would ache, for the rest of his life, whenever the weather turned the way it turned before snow — a small, permanent forecast written into his own body.

He did not send word ahead. He told himself, on the long journey home, that this was practicality — that the roads were unreliable and a letter might arrive after him or not at all — but the truth, which he admitted to no one and barely to himself, was that he could not find the words to write, and did not trust himself to write anything shorter than the whole unbearable story, and could not yet bear to write that either.

The valley, when he finally reached it, was smaller than he remembered, the way home always is to someone who has been made larger, in the worst sense, by what he has survived. He walked the last stretch of road on foot, the shawl Zehnain had given him worn through at both elbows, the clay lamp — never lit again after that gray dawn, but never left behind either — wrapped carefully in what remained of his kit.

He saw the lamp in the window before he saw the house properly, or rather he saw the light of it, spilling out onto the road in the early dusk exactly where it had spilled every evening for going on three years,

through every piece of news that should by any reasonable accounting have extinguished it for good. He stood at the crossroads for a long moment simply looking at that small stubborn light, and found that he could not, for a while, make his legs carry him the rest of the way, not out of any failure of longing but because he understood, standing there, that walking through that door meant becoming, officially and permanently, the only one of three brothers left to walk through it, and some part of him wanted to stay at the crossroads a little longer, in the last minute before that became simply and forever true.

It was Seerat who saw him first, coming out to check the lamp's oil as she did every evening, and she did not run to him, and she did not call out, and she did not, even then, allow herself the collapse she had been postponing for three years on the theory that someone in the house needed to remain standing. She walked to him at an ordinary pace, as though he were returning from an ordinary errand, and when she reached him she took his face in both hands the way their mother once had, and looked at him for a long moment without speaking, reading in his eyes the whole answer to a question she had not needed to ask aloud, because his silence about Ahmed was, itself, the entire telegram.

“You kept your promise,” she said finally. “You came back to the tree.”

“Not all of me did,” Adnan said, and it was the truest sentence he had spoken since the front.

“Enough of you did,” Seerat said, and pulled him inside, out of the cold, toward the small stubborn light that had never once, in three years, gone out.

Chapter Eight

What the Lantern Still Remembers

Zehnain married him the following spring, in a ceremony smaller and quieter than either family had once imagined for their eldest children, but a ceremony all the same, because the valley had learned, by then, that waiting for grief to finish before allowing joy back in the door was a wait that could very easily consume an entire life, and none of them, not after everything, were willing to spend what remained of theirs that way.

Their mother lived four more years, her hands never steadying, and spent a good portion of those years sitting under the walnut tree in fair weather, sometimes with Hamad's notebook open on her lap though her eyes had grown too weak to properly read it, as if the holding of it mattered more than the reading. When she died, they buried her, as she had asked, close enough to the tree that its roots would eventually reach her, which Seerat said was less a burial than a kind of homecoming, and no one in the family argued the point.

Adnan and Zehnain had two sons of their own in time, and neither he nor Seerat could ever quite explain to the boys, in words that felt adequate, why their father sometimes went quiet under the walnut tree for no occasion anyone could name, or why their aunt Seerat still, every single evening without exception, filled and lit a small brass lamp and set it in the window before anything else was done in the house — not dinner, not prayers, the lamp first, always the lamp first — though eventually the boys stopped asking and simply understood, the way children come to understand the rituals of a house without ever being formally taught them, that some lights are not lit for anyone currently

walking toward home, but for everyone who ever did, and everyone who tried to, and everyone the road did not, in the end, allow to finish the walk.

Adnan carved two names into the walnut tree's trunk himself, low enough that a boy reaching up on tiptoe could still trace the letters with his fingers, and never once, in all the years afterward, told anyone — not Zehnain, not Seerat, not his own sons when they were finally old enough to ask what the carving meant — the particular weight of standing at that trunk with a knife in his hand, or what he had said aloud to the bark, alone, before he began cutting.

What Seerat would say, decades later, to a grandniece curious about the lamp and the tree and the quiet that sometimes settled over her uncle for no visible reason, was only this: that men suffer a particular kind of loneliness that the valley never taught anyone how to name — the loneliness of loving people they were never given the words, or the permission, to grieve for out loud. That her brother had carried two brothers' worth of silence home from a war that gave him no language for it, and had spent the rest of his life learning to set that silence down for an hour at a time, under a tree that remembered all three of them exactly as they had been before anyone asked anything of them at all.

And that the lamp, still lit every evening in that window, had never once been about whether anyone was still out there to see it.

It had always, only, been about being the kind of house that kept the window lit regardless — so that whoever needed to find their way back, in whatever form that finding took, would know, from however far away, that someone here had never once stopped looking for them.